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Is There A Policy?

Conduct Of Viet Nam War Is Major Campaign Issue

CPYRGHT

DELEGATES TO the Democratic National Convention had just nominated presidential and vice presidential candidates to do battle with the Republicans for the biggest political prize of them all when the Southeast Asia mess became an even bigger issue.

In the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon, terror roamed the streets. Buddhists and Roman Catholics were rioting, hacking each other to pieces with machetes.

After several days of blood-letting, Viet Nam army units, sorely needed in the guerrilla war with the Red Invaders to the north, restored a semblance of order.

And today Nguyen Xuan Oanh took over the reins of government as acting premier. He formerly served as head of Viet Nam economic affairs. The deposed president, Gen. Nguyen Khanh, continued as a figure in the caretaker government.

Khanh's regime was short-lived. But when he became chief of state, the Johnson administration waxed enthusiastic, hailing the move as strengthening Viet Nam's position.

A recent study of the situation by the Central Intelligence Agency which became public last week, noted that the Khanh regime lacked leadership, adding that "there is considerable serious doubt that victory can be won."

The report was made by Willard Matthias, a member of the CIA's Board of National Estimates.

This evaluation might very well mean that a "negotiated settlement" is in the making. The State Department, however, denies it represents policy. It was President de Gaulle of France who first suggested that the only way "to win" the Viet Nam war was to make a deal with the Communists and set up a neutralist form of government similar to that in Laos.

THAT "NASTY LITTLE WAR," as it has so aptly been described, hasn't been going at all well. More and more Americans, attached to Vietnamese units as advisers, were being killed, usually in ambush. The tactics of the Communists are to infiltrate South Viet Nam lines, raid and massacre, and then disappear into the rain forests. These hit-and-run forays are not calculated to seize and hold ground; their purpose is terrorism. The growing question among Americans is if the South Viet Nam people and government really have the stomach for this war, or do they expect the United States to ultimately come over in force?

The American public, wary of "police actions" of this sort, might well ask what the administration's policy is concerning Viet Nam, torn by internal strife and threatened by a full-scale invasion of Saigon. If a strategic plan exists it is a well-kept secret, obscured by statements that things are going well to reports that chances of victory are remote.

Stability has long been an important missing ingredient in the internal affairs of South Viet Nam. This means that it has been extremely difficult for U.S. advisers to advise, or get the cooperation needed to properly execute the war.

Certainly, the conduct of Southeast Asia affairs will become one of the major themes of the presidential campaign, along with other foreign policy issues such as the doorstep situation of Cuba and the weakening of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. There will be charges emanating from the Goldwater camp and explanations due from the LBJ forces.